




A (Re)view of the Philosophical Foundations of Strategic Management

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This paper aims to review how different approaches to social inquiry (e.g. positivist, postpositivist, interpretive, postmodernist and critical theory) have been used in strategy research and how these main paradigms engage with strategy. In a fragmented domain, debates typically match paradigms to schools of thought and use the paradigm concept, sometimes even promiscuously, to examine the underlying premises of different theories. Thus, scholars tend to overlook the debate on philosophical meta-theoretical assumptions (ontological, epistemological and methodological) and prefer onto-epistemological approaches that are considered to be ‘normal science’, which underestimate the contributions of certain less traditional streams of research. This review offers a fresh view of the philosophical foundations of the strategic literature by combining author co-citation and content analysis of a sample of academic sources and analyses both the meta-theoretical assumptions and the basic paradigmatic assumptions for central constructs that strategy researchers attach to their frameworks (e.g. strategy, environment, firm and strategist). This endeavour enables scholars who work in a multidisciplinary field to gain a better understanding of the philosophical beliefs, principles and conventions held by different research communities and theoretical approaches. Exposing the underlying assumptions, as is done in this study, is a key step in theory development. Hence, this review can help researchers, young scholars and doctoral students navigate a confusing research landscape, problematize the existing literature and set new research questions.

Introduction

Originating in the early 1960s, strategic management was widely accepted as a scientific field by the 1980s, when economists controlled the arena. Although the field has witnessed dramatic and successful progress since then (Hitt *et al.* 2004; Leiblein and Reuer 2020), the continuous alternation of dominant schools of thought and refocusing of the field have led to polarization and fragmentation (Durand *et al.* 2017; Sanchez and Heene 1997; Stonehouse and Snowdon 2007), which has shaped the accumulation of knowledge (Camerer 1985; Carlson and Hatfield 2004; Summer *et al.* 1990). To study the evolution of the field, scholars have proposed clas-

sifications of schools or models of strategy (Chaffee 1985; French 2009; Knights and Morgan 1991; Martinet 1997; Mintzberg and Lampel 1999; Rouleau and Seguin 1995; Whittington 1993). Scholars have also introduced concepts from the philosophy and sociology of science, including dominant designs (Herrmann 2005), the Lakatosian idea of a research programme (Farjoun 2002; Teece 1990) and especially the Kuhnian paradigm concept (Ansoff 1987; Camerer 1985; Combe 1999; Dagnino 2016; Prahalad and Hamel 1994; Rasche 2008; Sanchez and Heene 1997; Schendel 1994).

Following Kuhn's (1970) conceptualization of paradigms, strategic management has been recognized as a multiparadigmatic body of research.

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As Calori (1998, p. 284) suggests, one ‘unifying paradigm’ does not exist, whereas the combination of interdisciplinary roots and theoretical incommensurability has made it doubtful that a single dominant or unifying ‘paradigm will ever govern the field’ during a period of normal science (Leiblein and Reuer 2020; Schendel 1994, p. 2). Although many strategy scholars consider the paradigmatic discussion to be overly ambitious (Volberda 2004) or do not see Kuhn’s (1970) revolution-driven idea as the best framework for understanding the scientific progress of the strategy field (Durand *et al.* 2017; Rumelt *et al.* 1994), Kuhn’s (1970) model remains highly influential in management research (Shepherd and Challenger 2013). Indeed, not only is the paradigm concept popular in strategy debates (Ansoff 1987; Camerer 1985; Combe 1999; Dagnino 2016; Prahalad and Hamel 1994; Rasche 2008; Sanchez and Heene 1997; Schendel 1994), but the presence of multiple paradigms in strategy research has also guided the process of knowledge accumulation (Carlson and Hatfield 2004).

However, most previous paradigmatic discussions in the strategy field typically match paradigms to theories or schools of thought while understanding the paradigm concept in the Kuhnian sense. Moreover, the paradigmatic debates among strategic management scholars are quite scattered, although such debates in organization science have been intense and have led to controversies that took the form of paradigm wars between the late 1980s and mid-1990s (Cannella and Paetzold 1994; Donaldson 1999; Jackson and Carter 1993; Pfeffer 1993; Willmott 1993). Earlier studies tend to overlook the debate on philosophical meta-theoretical assumptions (ontological, epistemological and methodological) and undervalue less traditional streams of research. These circumstances have led to a state of ‘resounding silence’ (Whipp 1999, p. 19) and call for an ‘explicit philosophical debate in strategy literature’ (Mir and Watson 2001, p. 1170), particularly more post-Kuhnian paradigmatic explorations, which accept ‘multiparadigmaticism’ (McKelvey 1997) in the preparadigmatic social fields (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Cunliffe 2011; Deetz 1996; Gioia and Pitre 1990; Morgan and Smircich 1980).

Following Rasche’s (2008, p. 35) call for an approach that combines the ideas of Kuhn (1970) and Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) notion of meta-paradigms, this paper scrutinizes the strategy research by identifying its main scholarly communities and deconstructing the meta-theoretical premises and

underlying assumptions embedded in the most popular theories in the field. Although taxonomies have evolved to reflect the evolution of social paradigms, the social sciences have typically been organized around contending paradigms such as positivist, postpositivist, interpretive, postmodernist and critical theory (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Lincoln *et al.* 2018). This paper aims not to discuss these sociological paradigms deeply, which many experts have already done (Cunliffe 2011; Deetz 1996; Gephart 2004; Hassard and Cox 2013), but rather to review how different approaches to social enquiry have been used in strategy research and how the main paradigms engage with strategy.

To achieve its goal, the paper first builds a paradigmatic interpretation of the strategy field by combining author co-citation and content analysis of a sample of academic sources. Next, after isolating scientific communities, the study intends to isolate theories, discuss their underlying assumptions and illuminate four onto-epistemological spaces conceptualized as meta-paradigms. Thus, the contribution of this review to the strategic management literature is twofold. First, it offers a fresh view of the philosophical foundations of the strategic literature by recognizing and describing the four main meta-paradigms in strategic management. Second, it scrutinizes the basic model problems and meta-theoretical assumptions (ontological, epistemological and methodological) of the main strategy meta-paradigms. This endeavour enables scholars who work in a multidisciplinary field to gain a better understanding of the philosophical beliefs, principles and conventions held by different research communities and theoretical approaches. Exposing the underlying assumptions, as is done in this study, is a key step in theory development (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011; Makadok *et al.* 2018). Hence, this review can help researchers, young scholars and doctoral students navigate a confusing research landscape, problematize the existing literature and set new research questions.

The paradigm concept in organizational inquiry

In organizational inquiry, ‘the term paradigm has become promiscuous’ (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 88) and ‘holds different meanings to different researchers’ (Carlson and Hatfield 2004, p. 274). These views are not surprising, particularly considering both the lack of clarity of Kuhn’s paradigm concept

(McKelvey 1999; Pinder and Moore 1980) and the fact that Kuhn himself uses the term ‘paradigm’ in over 20 senses (Masterman 1970; McKelvey 1999; Morgan 1980). Morgan (1980, pp. 606–607) groups these uses into three broad categories: first, ‘as a complete view of reality’; second, ‘as relating to the concrete use of specific kinds of tools and text for the process of scientific puzzle solving’; and third, ‘as relating to the social organization of science in terms of schools of thought connected with particular kinds of scientific achievements’. Similarly, Carlson and Hatfield (2004) conclude that the term ‘paradigm’ in strategy research alternatively refers to the specific phenomena that must be studied, the specific theory or hypothesis being used to explain the relevant findings, and the methodological approach used to conduct the research.

Organizational and strategy scientists typically refer to the concept of paradigm and associate it with the idea of a school of thought or even theory. Davis (2010) concludes that the main theories from the 1970s (a handful of paradigms) still dominate the research in organizational theory, whereas Donaldson (1995, p. 4) considers these alternative organizational theories to be antithetic and incommensurable ‘paradigms in the Kuhnian sense’, which have their own axioms and theoretical ideas, language and set of supporters that form a scholarly community. A similar position is taken by Aldrich (1988) in his participation in the paradigmatic debate.

Most previous paradigmatic discussions in the strategy field have also matched paradigms to theories or research streams (Dagnino 2016; Furrer *et al.* 2008; Gavetti and Levinthal 2004; MacIntosh and MacLean 1999; McKiernan 1996; Teece *et al.* 1997). Following a ‘balanced pluralism’ view – such as that advocated by Foss (1996a, p. 4) – paradigms are understood as different ‘theoretical alternatives’ that use models drawing on different core assumptions to examine the same phenomenon. While using paradigms in the ‘Kuhnian’ sense, strategy researchers typically examine the core premises included in the model problems of different theories. These scholars focus mainly on the discussion of incommensurability, alternately calling for eclecticism and pluralism (Foss 1996a; Mahoney 1993; Schoemaker 1993; Thomas and Pruett 1993), integration (Combe 1999; Durand *et al.* 2017) and cross-fertilization (Mahoney 1993; McKiernan 1997; Montgomery 1988; Seth and Thomas 1994). Moreover, like organizational inquiry, strategy research has traditionally been dominated by

the positivist (functionalist–managerialist) approach (McKelvey 1997, 2003), which sees strategy as rational planning and control (formulated and implemented by functional managers). Consequently, previous studies tend to overlook the debate on philosophical meta-theoretical assumptions (ontological, epistemological and methodological) when addressing the paradigmatic discussion and typically prefer approaches that are considered to be ‘normal science’, which underestimate the contributions of certain less traditional, that is nonpositivist, streams of research (Carter *et al.* 2010; Pettigrew *et al.* 2002).

The concept of paradigms remains influential in management research (Shepherd and Challenger 2013), whereas the paradigmatic discussion is still a powerful tool (Hassard 2016) to understand the philosophical foundations of the strategy field. It identifies the lack of a single disciplinary matrix (Kuhn 1970) and emphasizes the roots of incommensurability. Although Kuhn’s (1970) model may be better suited to natural sciences and has been harshly criticized (McKelvey 1999), later paradigmatic developments accept the compatibility between incommensurability and the simultaneous existence of several paradigms in (preparadigmatic) social fields (Johnson and Duberley 2000). For instance, Burrell and Morgan (1979) abstract the paradigm concept as a set of assumptions related to ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. Using a four-quadrant matrix scheme outlined by two fundamental debates in its axes (the objectivist vs. subjectivist philosophy of science and the sociology of regulation vs. the sociology of change), these authors suggest the simultaneous existence of four meta-paradigms in social fields: functionalist (objective–regulation), interpretive (subjective–regulation), radical humanism (subjective–radical change) and radical structuralism (objective–radical change).

Although the framework of Burrell and Morgan (1979) has been ‘critiqued’ (Willmott 1993), it has also been ‘defended’ (Jackson and Carter 1991, 1993). Many scholars have organized the social sciences around paradigms following the legacies of Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) classification (Baronov 2016; Blaikie 2007; Blaikie and Priest 2017; Cunliffe 2011; Deetz 1996; Gephart 2004; Johnson and Duberley 2000; Lincoln *et al.* 2018; Scherer *et al.* 2015). Consequently, Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) framework remains a reference (Cunliffe 2011, p. 649) and constitutes ‘a good map to navigate the theory pluralism of strategy...’ (Scherer 1998, p. 153). However, the methods of philosophically theorizing in

organization theory have changed since Burrell and Morgan's (1979) model was first introduced, which has eroded the subjectivity–objectivity division and stimulated the legitimization of not only a number of synthetic perspectives – such as the structuration theory and critical realism – but also the postmodern turn (Hassard 2016; Hassard and Cox 2013).

In this advancement, some paradigms have shown confluence (Lincoln *et al.* 2018). As a result, the boundaries between some of the traditional paradigms became conceivable only for analytical convenience. Thus, the blurring of boundaries between the interpretive and critical approaches to social inquiry (Prasad and Prasad 2002) resulted in the critical ethnography and critical hermeneutic positions, among others (Prasad 2005). Moreover, so-called 'post traditions' also have strong connections to and affinities with critical traditions (Prasad 2005; Willmott 2005), which has led some scholars to treat them as part of the same group (Alvesson and Deetz 2000, 2006). Consequently, the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979) has been extended (Gioia and Pitre 1990; Morgan and Smircich 1980) and revisited (Cunliffe 2011; Deetz 1996; Hassard and Cox 2013).

This paper adopts a definition that describes paradigms '... as universally recognized scientific achievements that provide model problems and solutions by referring to a certain methodology and meta-theoretical assumptions' (Rasche 2008, p. 35). Accordingly, this study analyses both the meta-theoretical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology) and Kuhn's (1970) basic paradigmatic assumptions regarding central constructs (e.g. strategy, environment, firm and strategist) that strategy researchers attach to their frameworks to determine the model problem and its solution. In this way, this study takes the following paradigms as a starting point: positivist, critical realist, interpretive, critical theory and postmodernist (Table 1).

Methodology

The present paper follows a multiple-step research process to isolate the main paradigms in strategy research. The process starts from a systematic literature review methodology (Tranfield *et al.* 2003) and includes multiple steps. The first step follows Kuhn (1970, p. 176), who suggests that 'scientific communities can and should be isolated without prior recourse to paradigms; the latter can then be dis-

covered by scrutinizing the behaviour of a given community's members'. Citation patterns were suggested as a potential approach to detecting paradigms (Nerur *et al.* 2008). Thus, a dataset of relevant articles was identified, and the related bibliometric information was downloaded to conduct a co-citation analysis to recognize these invisible colleges (Vogel 2012) that share 'formal and informal communication networks, including those discovered in correspondence and in the linkages among citations' (Kuhn 1970, p. 178). Based on the resulting co-citation network, the main theories in strategic management were identified, and basic assumptions of these theories were isolated (based on the content analysis of key sources). The next step includes an analysis that groups the main theories into meta-paradigms based on their onto-epistemological assumptions.

In this context, the data collection follows a two-step approach. First, the bibliometric information of the 2774 articles published in the *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ) since 1980 was first downloaded (available in Elsevier's Scopus database on 19 August 2019). To guarantee plurality, the main keywords in these articles (Table 2) were used to identify a second sample of 3330 articles from the journals included in the *Academic Journal Guide 2018* (AJG3, AJG4 and AJG4* journals) by introducing selected keywords into Elsevier's Scopus search engine.

A co-citation analysis was conducted to represent the intellectual structure of the field. Co-citation analysis has been used to analyse both the entire field of strategic management (Nerur *et al.* 2008; Ramos-Rodríguez and Ruiz-Navarro 2004) and different theories within the field, such as the resource-based view (Acedo *et al.* 2006) and the dynamic capabilities approach (Di Stefano *et al.* 2010; Vogel and Güttel 2013). Following Nerur *et al.* (2008), we chose author co-citation analysis because it best represents the social construction of the research field (Zupic and Čater 2015). By analysing the number of times that a pair of authors are cited together in the same document, the method aims to identify not only contributors who offer similar ideas but also boundary-spanning scholars (Nerur *et al.* 2008). Using the VOSviewer software (van Eck *et al.* 2010), the co-citation analysis is based on the core 750 authors who meet the threshold of 100 citations. This threshold is the optimal solution for coping with the trade-off between accuracy and clarity in the resulting picture.

Next, a set of substantive keywords was isolated to find relevant articles regarding paradigms in the

Table 1. Paradigms in organizational inquiry

Paradigm	Positivist Functionalist, modernist, positivist	Critical realist	Interpretive Constructionist, interpretive, phenomenological	Critical theory	Postmodernist Deconstructionist, nihilist, postmodernist
Ontology	Realist	Critical (depth) realist	Nominalist	Idealist (the dominant not the only one)	Relativist/idealist
Reality	An apprehendable, singular, real and concrete reality (Cunliffe 2011; Gephart 2004).	Stratified (concrete) reality consisting of intransitive entities that exist independently of our human knowledge, 'may not be observable and may be comprehended differently by different people (i.e. transitive) according to the varying... conventions deployed through their human agency' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 154).	Local and specific, symbolically (ethnomethodology) or socially (hermeneutic, ethnography, phenomenology) constructed realities. Social reality is the product of its inhabitants (Blaikie 2007, p. 131).	(A discursive) reality is independent of human subjectivity, but <i>a priori</i> cognitive principles shape reality, and interest and sociocultural factors influence sensory experience (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 117). Observational language is not theory-neutral and is central to the formation of subjectivity (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 133).	Particular meaningful versions of reality are certified and socially constructed by 'historically and socially contingent discourses' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 101).
Epistemology	Positivist	Neo-realism/(inconclusive) fallibilism	Constructionist	A range exists (Blaikie 2007, p. 180), from constructionism (mainly) to conventionalism, empiricism and rationalism.	Relationist
Methodology and methodological approaches	Deductive	Retroduction	Interpretive	Interpretive	Reflexive
Knowledge	Surveys, observations, coded interviews, case studies, focus groups, grounded theory, action research Empirical-analytic Knowledge production. Knowledge is accepted or rejected based on its correspondence with the facts (data) seen in the objectively measured world (correspondence theory of truth) (Johnson and Duberley 2000).	Observational data, interviews, case studies Socially constructed knowledge. Discourse influences the comprehension of reality (Johnson and Duberley 2000, pp. 152–53). 'A correspondence theory of truth is ultimately unattainable' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 175).	Observational data, hermeneutics, interviews, case studies Knowledge is value-free (Scherer <i>et al.</i> 2015, p. 39); through social interaction and the mediation of language, concepts and meanings must be derived from social actors' concepts and meanings (Blaikie 2007, p. 131).	Textual data, narratives, discourse analysis, deconstruction. Ethnography is popular with some postmodernists (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 106). Foucault's genealogy type of analysis. Value-laden knowledge (Scherer <i>et al.</i> 2015, p. 39), resulting from 'negotiated rational consensus' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 148), 'implicit in human communication' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 121). 'A consensus theory of truth' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 148).	Knowledge is relative and a value-laden linguistic entity (socially) constructed through language (Johnson and Duberley 2000, pp. 95–96) and open to reconstruction (Blaikie 2007, p. 49).

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Paradigm	Positivist Functionalist, modernist, postivist	Critical realist	Interpretive Constructionist, interpretive, phenomenological	Critical theory	Postmodernist Deconstructionist, nihilist, postmodernist
Human nature Inquirer and the link between researcher (subject) and researched (object)	Determinist Researcher is an 'outsider', a 'detached observer' (Blaikie and Priest 2017, p. 46). There is subject-object independence (Cartesian dualism) and observation, and the criteria for choosing what to observe and how to observe it are objective, value-free, theory-neutral and politically neutral (Johnson and Duberley 2000).	Weak voluntarism Researcher is a 'reflective partner', both 'insider and outsider' (Blaikie and Priest 2017, p. 46).	Voluntarist Researchers are 'insiders', 'empathetic observers', 'faithful reporters' (in the case of critical discourse analysis, this characteristic may apply in terms of data but not in terms of meaning) and 'mediators of languages' (Blaikie and Priest 2017, p. 46).	Voluntarist A co-constructor of knowledge (Lincoln <i>et al.</i> 2018). The relationships are 'never stable or fixed and are mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 132).	Deconstructionist Researcher is a 'situated speaker'. Readers have their own 'assumptions' (Johnson and Duberley 2000, pp. 108–109). The subject is decentred though shared discourses (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 101).
Philosophical/ sociological roots	Compte, Durkheim (positivism), (early) Wittgenstein (logical positivism), Popper (critical rationalism)	Critical realism (structuralism of Bhaskar, Archer)	Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, Wodak)	Postmodernism (Lyotard, Baudrillard), poststructuralism (Derrida, Foucault), (late) Wittgenstein, Bakhtin	
		Structuration theory (Giddens and Bourdieu), actor network theory (Latour)	Phenomenology (Husserl), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel), social construction (Schutz, Berger, Luckman)	Critical ethnography and critical hermeneutics (Habermas, Ricoeur) and the Frankfurt school (Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer)	Postcolonialism (Said, Spivak), late Foucault

Source: Based on Baronov (2016), Blaikie (2007), Blaikie and Priest (2017), Cunliffe (2011), Hassard and Cox (2013), Johnson and Duberley (2000), Lincoln *et al.* (2018), Prasad (2005) and Scherer *et al.* (2015).

Table 2. Keywords used in the search string

STEP 1 Keywords	'Strategic Planning', 'Competition', 'Resource-based View', 'Resource-based Theory', 'Industrial Organization', 'Competitive Advantage', 'Strategic Management', 'Corporate Governance', 'Strategy', 'Strategic Alliances', 'Corporate Strategy', 'Dynamic Capabilities', 'Strategic Groups', 'Firm Strategy', 'Strategic Change', 'Competitive Dynamics', 'Business Model', 'Absorptive Capacity', 'Competitive Intelligence', 'Upper Echelons', 'Strategic Decision Making', 'Firm Capabilities', 'Organizational Capabilities', 'Strategic Decisions', 'Competitive Strategy', 'Corporate Strategies', 'Strategic Alliance', 'International Strategy', 'Strategy Implementation', 'Strategy Process', 'Strategy Research', 'Resource-based View of the Firm', 'Strategy Formulation', 'Strategy Formation', 'Business Strategies', 'Knowledge-based Theory', 'Strategy-as-practice', 'Strategy as Practice'
STEP 2 Keywords	Primary 'normal science', 'scientific revolution', 'incommensurab*', 'philosophy of science', 'philosophical', 'epistemology*', 'ontology*', 'schools of thought', 'strategy paradigms', 'paradigms in strategic management', 'paradigms in strategy', 'paradigm(s)'
	Supplementary 'strategic behavior*', 'strategic management', 'strategic management research', 'business policy', 'strategy research', 'strategic thinking'

strategic management field (Table 2). We searched for (published and in-press) articles from AJG3, AJG4 and AJG4* journals by entering selected keywords in the search engine of Elsevier's Scopus. To avoid obtaining unrelated articles, we required items to contain a minimum of one of the selected primary keywords in its title, keywords or abstract. To ensure the articles' substantive relevance, we also required that each article include a minimum of one of the selected supplementary words in their text (Newbert 2007).

The first round of searching returned 1625 hits. Next, articles from unranked or low-ranked journals (AJG1 and AJG2) were excluded. After scanning for relevance by reviewing the abstracts, 230 articles were preselected. The selection criteria included articles that (1) explain the historical evolution of the strategic management field, (2) discuss or bridge different schools or paradigms in the field, (3) discuss contributions from another field to strategic management or (4) focus on the research agenda at various moments in time. Other major databases were used to identify missing articles, such as ABI Inform Complete, Ebsco, Emerald, Sage Journals, Springer and Taylor & Francis Online. After adding 70 new items, the final sample comprised 300 AJG3, AJG4 and AJG4* articles. AJG1 and AJG2 journals, books and book chapters were excluded from the search. Nevertheless, some articles from low-ranked or unranked journals and several books were considered because they explicitly discuss the foundations of the strategy field (e.g. Kay *et al.* 2003; Pettigrew *et al.* 2002; Rumelt *et al.* 1994; Whittington 2010).

Paradigms in strategic management

Business strategy emerged as a research arena in the 1960s (Rumelt *et al.* 1994). Andrews (1971), Ansoff (1965) and Chandler (1962) are considered to be the founding fathers of the strategy field (Furrer *et al.* 2008). Their classic models are jointly referred to as the '*business policy and planning*' research and represent the origins of the so-called design and planning strategy schools. In the 1960s, strategy research was normative, and generalizations emerged from case studies and were translated into practice due to the intervention of large consulting firms (Ghemawat 2002; Rumelt *et al.* 1994). The 1970s witnessed the slow takeover of the field by research rooted in organization theory, sociology and political science, which was conceptually based on various the-

ories such as population ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1977), contingency theory (Burns and Stalker 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967) and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). New insights into organizational economics also entered the strategy discussion. In particular, transaction cost economics (Williamson 1975) and agency theory (Fama and Jensen 1983; Jensen and Meckling 1976) influenced the development of strategy inquiry. The 'brewing' studies (Hatten and Schendel 1977; Hatten *et al.* 1978) linked organizational resource choices and firm performance by emphasizing the importance of firm heterogeneity and conduct and the relevance of environmental factors. Moreover, scholars from Harvard's Economics Department (Caves and Porter 1977; Hunt 1972) who were linked to the IO tradition reinterpreted the structure-conduct-performance (SCP) paradigm of Bain (1951, 1956) and Mason (1939).

Influenced by IO research, the positioning approach (Buzzle *et al.* 1975; Gale and Branch 1982; Henderson 1970) – particularly Porter's (1980) framework – became dominant in the 1980s and early 1990s (Prahalad and Hamel 1994, p. 15). Firm performance was assumed to rest on a firm's capacity to create and sustain a competitive advantage with respect to its competitors in the same industry or, that is, on how well the firm positions and differentiates itself in the industry (Hoskisson *et al.* 1999, p. 426). The resource-based view (RBV) (Barney 1991; Peteraf 1993; Wernerfelt 1984), which emerged in the late 1980s, implied a refocus on the firm (Hoskisson *et al.* 1999, p. 241). The RBV argues that a firm's unique resources and capabilities explicate the possession of a competitive and sustainable advantage over competitors (Barney 1991). Additionally, drawing on Polanyi's (1962, 1967) distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, the knowledge-based view (KBV) brought other discussions to the field, including ideas such as organizational learning, knowledge creation and knowledge management (Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Grant 1996; Kogut and Zander 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Finally, the dynamic capability view (DCV) (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000; Helfat *et al.* 2007; Teece *et al.* 1997) incorporated the contributions of the 'Kirznerian, Schumpeterian, and evolutionary theories of economic change' (Teece 2007, p. 1325).

Strategy scholars typically differentiate between the research on the strategy content and the research on the strategy process; the former focuses on linking decisions and structures to outcomes, and the

latter focuses on activities that drive and sustain the strategy (Huff and Reger 1987). After its initial dominance in the 1960s, the strategy process research developed in the shadow of the above-described economics-based strategy content research. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, strategy process research was dominated by simple and holistic (Bower 1970; Galbraith 1977; Miles and Snow 1978; Van de Ven *et al.* 1989) studies grounded in contingency theory and the concept of ‘fit’ (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992, p. 8). These empirical studies integrate a body of research that gained momentum (Donaldson 1987; Fredrickson 1986; Hinings and Greenwood 1988; Miller 1986, 1987; Miller and Friesen 1984; Mintzberg 1979; Tushman and Romanelli 1985) and persisted even later (Amburgey and Dacin 1994; Miller 1996; Short *et al.* 2008). In addition, a group of cognition scholars (Walsh 1995) built on the works of the Carnegie tradition (Cyert and March 1963) and applied ‘cognitive and social psychology to strategic management theory and practice’ in what Powell *et al.* (2011) call the ‘behavioral strategy’ school. Cognitive theories focus on ‘knowledge structures, memory, attention, attribution, and problem solving’ (Huff *et al.* 2000, p. 29).

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a reduction in the traditional process research on strategic planning (Whittington and Cailluet 2008), whereas a group of scholars (Burgelman 1991; Chaffee 1985; Mintzberg 1994; Pettigrew 1992; Quinn 1989; Van de Ven 1992) introduced new ‘perspectives based on politics, sociology and organization theory’ (Booth 1998, p. 257). This evolution involved a departure from the prescriptive planning and design schools and a conceptual migration toward a greater recognition of the role of context, values, culture and politics in strategic thinking (Ezzamel and Willmott 2004, p. 44). Introduced in the 1970s, the role of the emergent approach was particularly relevant, whereas a set of publications by Johnson (1987), Pettigrew (1985, 1992, 1997) and Van de Ven (Van de Ven 1992; Van de Ven *et al.* 1989) can also be viewed as the seeds of a fresh approach within the strategy process tradition. Thus, European academics noted the need to move ‘beyond economics towards sociology’ with a pluralist ‘post-Mintzberian’ agenda (also see Jarzabkowski and Whittington 2008; Vaara and Whittington 2012). Thus, the strategy-as-practice (s-as-p) strand of research became the most recent approach to extend the traditional strategy process views.

The largest part of the above consummated strategy content and process research has its origins in

informal collegial networks (Crane 1972) that facilitate the organization and intellectual advancement of a scholarly domain (Vogel 2012). Through social processes, the members of a scientific community contribute to building and legitimating the field of knowledge (Hambrick and Chen 2008; Whitley 1984a). Scholarly communities, their key members and their theoretical underpinnings and behaviour must be identified before isolating paradigms (Kuhn 1970).

Structuring strategic management research

Based on the author co-citation analysis, this paper broadly overviews the intellectual structure of the field after 50 years of evolution to isolate different scholarly communities in strategy research. The co-citation network exposes four scholarly communities (Figure 1). At the top is (1) the literature on top management teams and corporate governance (e.g. Hambrick, Hitt, Zajac). At the bottom is the research on (2) the strategy process and strategic decision-making (right-hand side, e.g. Eisenhardt, Miller, Mintzberg), (3) competitive strategy and competitive advantage (middle, e.g. Barney, Porter, Teece) and (4) international business and strategic alliances (left-hand side, e.g. Gulati, Kogut, Singh). Communities 1 and 4 focus on corporate strategy, community 2 focuses on competitive strategy and community 3 brings together studies with these two focuses (Feldman 2020). Although these communities involve diverse research streams, the network showing the communities was selected for the sake of clarity. These communities are separated by structural holes but bridged by ‘boundary-spanning’ (Nerur *et al.* 2008) members (e.g. Barney, Eisenhardt, Hambrick, Hitt, Kogut, March, Pfeffer, Williamson).

Theories and their basic assumptions

In accordance with the historical evolution of the strategy domain, an analysis of the intellectual structure of the strategy field reveals the multidisciplinary roots of the strategic management field. Numerous theories have been used, many of which were born within the strategic management field, while other theories were borrowed from other disciplines (Kenworthy and Verbeke 2015). Although a co-citation analysis reveals the use of a large number of theories, not all have the same degree of popularity (see Table A1 in the Appendix for a comprehensive list). Kenworthy and Verbeke (2015, p. 181) recently identified

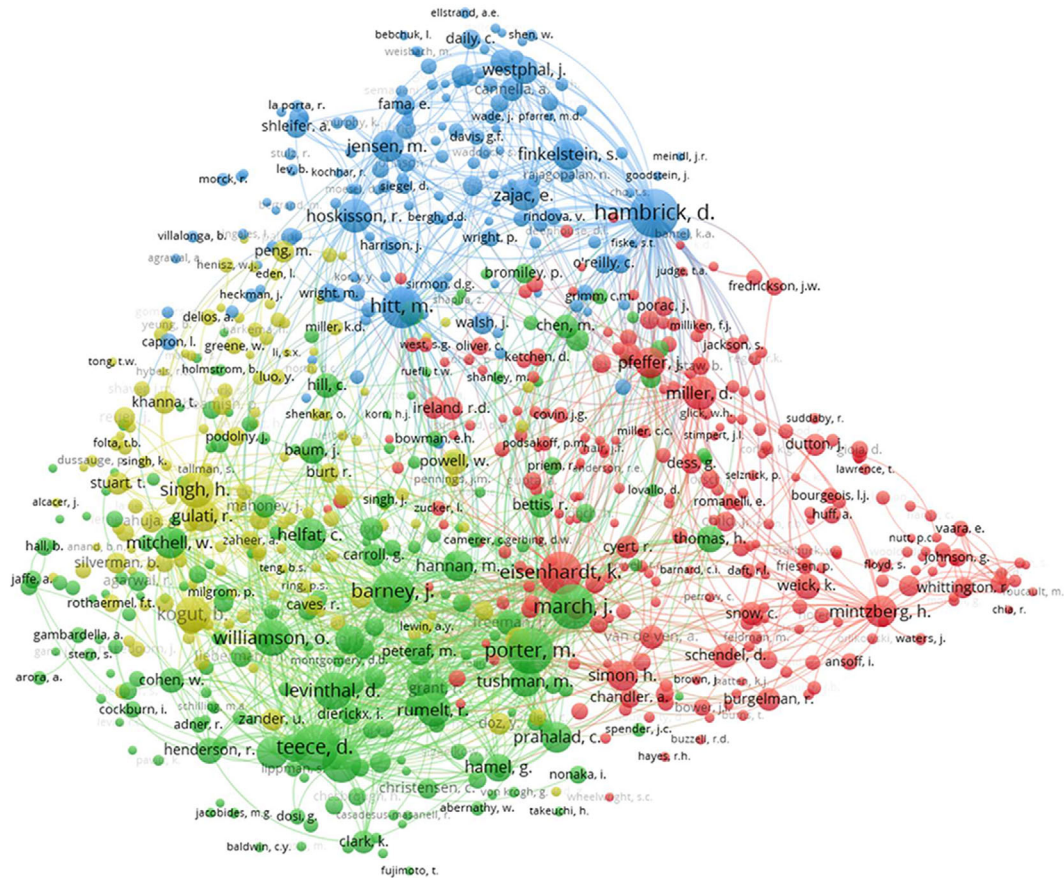


Figure 1. The intellectual structure of the strategy field [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

194 theories in strategic management but found that ‘only ten theories were tested more than ten times’.

As shown in Table 3, some theories are more popular and are used by different communities. The co-citation network yields evidence of two types of theories (for more details on the interpretation of the co-citation network, see Table A1 in the Appendix). First, ‘exogenous theoretical influences’ (Nerur *et al.* 2008) from organization economics are commonly used as conceptual apparatuses to build frameworks and to test particular hypotheses (e.g. agency theory, transaction cost economics, population ecology, institutional theory and resource dependence theory). Second, endogenous theories were developed within the strategic management field, such as the SCP framework (IO), RBV, KBV, DCV, the competitive dynamics approach and the strategy process stream of research.

The above-listed theories coincide with the theories pointed out by previous review studies as the

most relevant in strategic management (Furrer *et al.* 2008; Kenworthy and Verbeke 2015; Nerur *et al.* 2008; Ramos-Rodríguez and Ruiz-Navarro 2004). However, understanding the manner in which researchers construct the ‘world of strategy’ based on the different assumptions that they attach to their strategic realities (Rasche 2008, p. 3) is a necessary step in the identification of paradigms. Accordingly, Table 3 summarizes the basic assumptions included in the ‘Kuhnian’ model problem of the above-identified approaches to strategy (Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix offer an in-depth look at the basic assumptions that underlie the endogenous approaches).

Meta-paradigms and their assumptions

Until the publication of the foundational studies by Ansoff (1965), Chandler (1962) and Learned *et al.* (1965), strategy was characterized by pragmatic realism over abstraction, and normative generalizations

Table 3. Main approaches in strategic management research

Type of approach	Conceptual approach	Examples of authors applying the approach in different clusters of the co-citation network	What the problem model is designed to understand	Basic assumptions		
				The unit of analysis	The firm	Human behaviour/the strategist
Exogenous approaches	Behavioural theory of the firm	Cluster 2: Cyert, March, Simon	The sociopolitical requirements for collective outputs	The organization	Coalition of diverse interests and goals	Self-interest, risk averse, bounded rationality, satisficing
	Sensemaking and cognitive schema	Cluster 2: Weick, Gioia, Huff, Reger, Dutton, Chittipeddi, Lant	How do individuals and groups recognize and interpret stimuli and generate interpretations? (p. 21)	Social processes	Net of activities	Subjective, socially constructed mental models
	Contingency theory	Cluster 2: Chandler, Burns, Stalker, Lawrence, Lorsch, Thompson, Galbraith, Perrow, Miles, Snow, Bower Cluster 4: Kotabe, Joshi, Murray	How organizational success is obtained by maximizing the congruence between a set of (contingent) structural factors (e.g. organizational size, technology) to conform to environmental demands	The organization (a collective entity) pursuing a fit between its structure and the environment	Top-down contingent design (a collective entity)	Depersonalization [@] , rationality
Resource dependence theory	Resource dependence theory	Cluster 2: Pfeffer, Salancik, Cluster 1: Hillman, Cannella, Daily, Dalton, Ellstrand Cluster 4: Harrigan, Heide, Inkpen, Beamish, Ghobadian	How to coordinate the resource allocation and protect the organization from the stakeholders (task environment) that control the resources that are critical for the organization's survival	Interdependence among and exchanges between organizations (and tactics to reduce dependencies and uncertainty) [?]	Coalition of power holders	Subjective, mental models 'determined by the focal organization within which managers operate' (p. 219) ⁺⁺
						Weak determinism, not given reality (perceived environment)*, ++

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued

Type of approach	Conceptual approach	Examples of authors applying the approach in different clusters of the co-citation network	What the problem model is designed to understand	Basic assumptions		
				The unit of analysis	The firm	Human behaviour/the strategist
(Neo)institutional theory		Cluster 2: Suddaby, Hinings, Greenwood	How organizations are shaped and adapted in response to institutions (seeking social legitimacy) and how institutions adapt over time***	Institutions as a source of 'isomorphic' behaviour	A rationalized system	Normative rationality
		Cluster 3: DiMaggio, Rowan, Meyer, Scott, Tolbert, Dobbin, Goodstein, Lounsbury				
Population ecology		Cluster 4: Kostova, Zaheer, Peng, Roth, Dacin		Organizational populations	An 'inertial' actor (structural inertia)	Low purposive action, often self-interest++
		Cluster 2: Aldrich				
Transaction costs economics		Cluster 3: Hannan, Freeman, Carroll, Barnett	Demographic, ecological and environmental processes for particular organizational populations++	Firm-level dyadic transactions	A governance structure (hierarchy)##	Objective, given, one-for-all, uncertain, complex risk neutrality
		Cluster 1: Wiersema				
Agency theory		Cluster 4: Rugman, Hennart, Barkema, Teng, Das, Dyer, Gomez-Caseres, Beamish, Buckley	Choice between markets and hierarchies	Contract between principal (shareholder/board) and agent (manager)+. Partial goal conflict?	A nexus of contracts (separation of ownership and control)	Bounded rationality, self-interest, risk aversion+
		Cluster 1: Gomes-Mejia, Lubatkin, Cannella, Hill, Shleifer, Vishny, Certo, Dalton, Ellstrand, Fama, Demsetz, Jensen, Meckling				
		Cluster 4: Gulati, Singh, Reuer, Miller	How to write efficient contracts that contain the right incentives and control mechanisms to allocate decision rights, reduce information asymmetries and force agents to act in the principal's best interest			

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued

Type of approach	Conceptual approach	Examples of authors applying the approach in different clusters of the co-citation network	What the problem model is designed to understand	Basic assumptions			The context/environment
				The unit of analysis	The firm	Human behaviour/the strategist	
Endogenous approaches	Business policy and planning (deliberate strategy process)	Cluster 2: Ansoff, Andrews	'How planning practices are supposed to arrange the functions of an organization to achieve long-term goals' (p. 40)*	The organization	A collection of functions	Intended rationality	Objective, given, one-for-all, determinism
	Strategy process (emergent, processual)	Cluster 2: Mintzberg, Quinn, Burgelman, Floyd, Wooldrige, Pettigrew	How strategy creation takes the form of a learning/political process over time	Processes of strategy formation	A system shaped by context, values, culture and politics	Bounded rationality (emergent)	Weak determinism, either objective (emergent) or not given (processual)
	Strategy as practice	Cluster 2: Johnson, Whittington, Jarzabkowski, Langley, Vaara, Balogun, Rouleau, Seidl, Samra-Fredericks	How organizations practice strategy as an interplay between micro and macro, doings and sayings	Micro-level practices and the strategizing work	Net of micro practices and discourses	Subjective, socially constructed	Micro-macro interaction
	Positioning approach	Cluster 3: Porter, Bain, Caves, Scherer, McGahan	Competitive advantage (Chamberlain rents) by analysing the industry structure and potential generic strategies*	Industrial structure (that dictates the deliberate strategy -generic positions), firm and products [#]	Black box metaphor ^{##}	Rationality, conscious, profit maximizer	Objective, certain, given, efficient markets (equilibrium), moderate determinism*
Resource-based view ^a	Competitive dynamics	Cluster 3: Chen, Grimm, Smith	The timing of competitive moves based on the diffusion of information	Actions (attacks) and responses (counterattacks)	An act-response game player who conducts information processing	Rationality	Information rich, Objective
	Resource-based view ^a	Cluster 3: Wernerfelt, Barney, Peteraf, Mahoney, Penrose Cluster 4: Dassaige, Capron, Birkinshaw, Peng, Das, Teng	Competitive advantage (Ricardian quasi-rents) obtained by analysing a firm's resources and competences*	Bundles of resources and capabilities (in particular VRIN/O)	A set of resources and capabilities	Imperfect (bounded) rationality (and uncertainty)	Objective, moderate determinism*, efficient and well-defined markets (equilibrium) but not fully transparent ^{###}

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued

Type of approach	Conceptual approach	Examples of authors applying the approach in different clusters of the co-citation network	What the problem model is designed to understand	Basic assumptions			
				The unit of analysis	The firm	Human behaviour/the strategist	The context/environment
Knowledge-based view ^b	Organizational learning	Cluster 2: Spender, Schön, Argyris, Duguid, Brown, Nonaka, Takeuchi Cluster 3: Grant, Nonaka, Zander, Cohen, Levinthal, Argote, Levitt, Szulanski, Epple, Rosenkopf Cluster 1: Lubatkin Cluster 4: Kogut, Kale, Singh, Barkema, Delios, Parkhe, Makino, Chang, Inkpen, Beamish, Lyles, Khanna, Mudambi, Shan	Competitive advantage (Ricardian rents) obtained by analysing how firms can apply, integrate and protect knowledge The role of experience as an enabler of changes in the organization's knowledge, which may 'manifest itself in changes in beliefs/cognition, routines, or actions/behavior' ⁺⁺⁺	Knowledge (in particular tacit) and the process of knowledge creation in organizations or relevant units (in the past, individuals) and in networks and communities of practice	A cognitive system	Bounded rationality	Moderate determinism, efficient and well-defined (equilibrium) markets ^{###}
					A repository of knowledge	Bounded rationality	Moderate determinism
Dynamic capabilities	Cluster 3: Teece, Pisano, Shuen, Helfat, Mitchell Cluster 4: Gulati, Kale, Singh		Competitive advantage (Schumpeterian rents) obtained by analysing how firms can develop the resource/capability base while matching it to (fast) changing (dynamic) environmental conditions	Process, positions, paths ^{#d}	Adaptive entity	Rationality [#]	Endogenous industrial structure, firms have a low capacity for 'short-run' strategic reorientation [#]

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued

Type of approach	Conceptual approach	Examples of authors applying the approach in different clusters of the co-citation network	What the problem model is designed to understand	Basic assumptions			
				The unit of analysis	The firm	Human behaviour/the strategist	The context/environment
	Upper echelons theory	Cluster 1: Hambrick, Mason, Finkelstein, Carpenter	The influence of the personally biased interpretation and characteristics of the upper echelons on the strategic behaviour and performance of the firms	Top management teams and their characteristics	Reflections of their top executives	Bounded rationality	Weak determinism, exceeds human comprehension
	Evolutionary theory/Technological change	Cluster 3: Nelson, Winter, Schumpeter, Dosi, Utterback, Henderson, Tushman, Rosenbloom, Abernathy, Clark, Langlois	The dynamic process by which firm behaviour and market outcomes (and Schumpeterian rents) are jointly determined	Routines	A source of (routinized) knowledge, including the capacity to change routines	Optimizers, ^c weak rationality ^{##} , learning capabilities	Selective, codetermined, one-for-all*

Source: Theories and authors identified based on the co-citation network. Conceptual inputs come mainly from an adaptation of the tables developed by Huff *et al.* (2000, pp. 6–21) and draw on Mocciano Li Destri and Dagnino (2005)^{###}, Eisenhardt (1989)⁺, Jaffe (2001)⁺⁺, Johnson *et al.* (2007)^{**}, Rasche (2008)^{*}, Argote (2011)⁺⁺⁺, Seth and Thomas (1994)^{##}, Scott (1987)^{***}, Donaldson (1999)[@] and Teece *et al.* (1997)[#], He *et al.* (2020)[?].

^a Gavetti and Levinthal (2004, p. 1311) distinguish between the ‘high-church’ (e.g. Barney 1986) and ‘low-church’ (e.g. Dierickx and Cool 1989) variants of the RBV. The ‘high-church’ group maintains the neoclassical ‘postulates of rational choice and market equilibrium’, whereas the ‘low-church’ group rejects these suppositions and introduces insights from the behavioural perspective. For a recent detailed discussion on the evolution of the basic assumption of the RBV, refer to Foss and Hallberg (2017).

^b The listed basic assumptions hold only for the static version of the KBV.

^c Over the years, the focus of the theory was scaled up to a system-level focus for application at different levels of analysis (Teece 2020).

^d Nelson and Winter (1982) assume that ‘economic actors are rational’ (Huff *et al.* 2000, p. 29); however, later developments introduced bounded rationality.

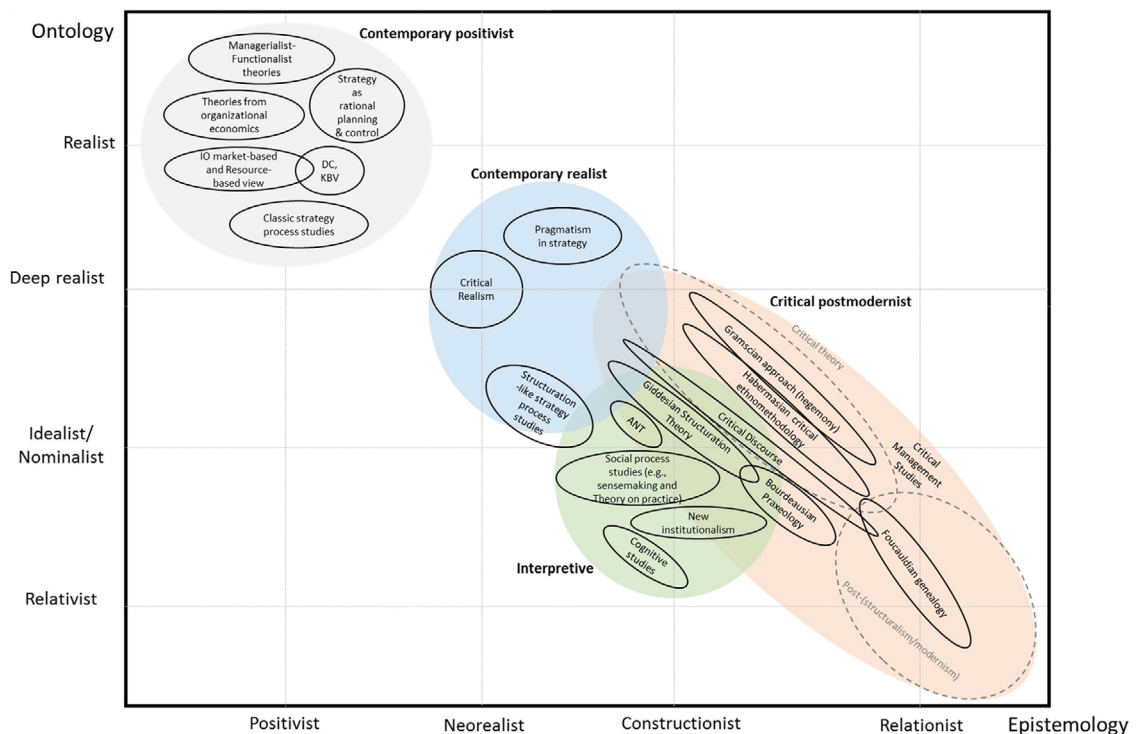


Figure 2. Onto-epistemological positions in strategy research [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

were proposed based on the case studies of organizational success. Although ‘[in] the 1960s, there was a more coherent and widely accepted set of premises, assumptions, instruments, and techniques that were well known as the business policy framework’ (Scherer 1998, p. 148), the *strategy field* was ‘striving for status’ ‘until about 1980’ (Hambrick and Chen 2008, p. 38). Certainly, there are conceptual differences in the three foundational works. Ansoff and Andrews were influenced by Chandler’s strategy–structure model (Harris and Ruefli 2000) and focused on the development of tools and best practices through the application of an inductive research methodology (essentially, case studies), and the work of Chandler and Ansoff was ‘notable for its rationalism and driving economic determinism’ (Whipp 1999, p. 11). Indeed, Chandler’s (1962) empiricist and positivistic approach (Amitabh and Gupta 2010) was designated the cornerstone of Cartesian philosophy in the field of strategy (Clegg *et al.* 2004, p. 22).

After a shift towards a more rigorous conceptualization of science in the 1970s, which included theory borrowing from organization theory, sociology, political science and organizational economics, strategic management became accepted as a scientific field in the early 1980s. Donaldson (1995, p.

23) acknowledges the paradigmatic differences between organizational economics and organizational sociology (in terms of their core theoretical stories and propositions, language and methods). Regardless, the move towards a new research style involved deductive (rather than inductive) methods for testing hypotheses, large databases, multivariate statistical methods, econometric analysis and the predominance of Popper’s falsification philosophy (Rumelt *et al.* 1991, p. 8), which currently dominates the field (Foss and Hallberg 2017).

Considering a paradigm to be a complete view of reality (Morgan 1980), the analysis moves from theories (and their basic assumptions) to paradigms based on meta-theoretical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology). The analyses confirm the dominance of a group of theories, which, based on their basic assumptions, expose four meta-paradigms. The main meta-paradigms are (1) contemporary positivism (a realist, positivistic and functionalist paradigm), (2) contemporary realism, (3) interpretive paradigms (hermeneutic/interpretive/social constructionism) and (4) critical postmodernism (Figure 2). Next, this paper reviews how different academics engaged with these meta-paradigms considering the previously recog-

nized post-Burrell and Morgan paradigmatic confluence (Cunliffe 2011; Hassard and Cox 2013; Prasad 2005; Willmott 2005).

The contemporary positivist meta-paradigm. Following Scherer and Dowling (1995), the first meta-paradigm is labelled ‘contemporary positivism’. This paradigm embodies ‘the dominant linear and rational approaches to strategy’ (Booth 1998, p. 258). By drawing on the hypothetical–deductive tradition (Martinet 2008), corporate strategy models ‘relied on the Cartesian paradigm’ (Calori 1998, p. 285), employed static assumptions from neoclassical economics and the IO tradition as the primary conceptual framework (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992) and reduced contexts to a set of contingent variables (Martinet 2008). Smircich and Stubbart (1985, p. 724) note that in mainstream strategic management research, ‘the objective environment [*as assumed by strategic choices and environmental determinists*] may be accurately [*rationality*] or inaccurately perceived [*bounded rationality*], but in either case, the task of strategic managers is to maintain congruence between environmental constraints and organizational needs’ (text in italics added). Single-reality organizations, their resources and their (deterministic) environments are conceived as given and detached entities; they are external to both researchers and strategies, their relationships follow quasi-universal fixed causal laws that apply across time and space, and they can be studied by applying the methods of natural science (Blaikie 2007; Scherer and Dowling 1995). Because of the dominance of this worldview, the strategic management field has been described as prematurely stuck in a ‘normal science straightjacket’ (Bettis 1991, p. 315).

Although the underlying sets of core assumptions attached to the model problems of the schools included in this paradigm reveal some differences in scholars’ strategic realities, these contemporary positivist traditions share or at least do not challenge a conventional understanding of strategizing. Given the many nuances discussed by Donaldson (1996), who concludes that contingency theory is the only fully positivist perspective if a strict approach is adopted in the assessment, these approaches build on a few taken-for-granted implicit assumptions (Rasche 2008). First, the ideas of fit and adaptation view the ‘organization and environment as two separate entities’ (Rasche 2008, p. 4), rest on the assumption of a ‘given’, ‘objective’ and ‘unique’ (one-for-all) environment and accept the existence of (a

certain level of) environmental determinism. Second, the existence of linear, rational and deliberate thinking requires the separation of strategy formulation (the CEO/planners) and strategy implementation (middle management) into two different entities (Rasche 2008). Third, the ‘fullness of strategic rules and resources’ indicates the existence of ‘generalizable’ and ‘decontextualized’ solutions to strategic research problems (Rasche 2008), such as Andrews’ (1971) SWOT analysis, Barney’s (1991) VRIN/O analysis and the generic strategies of Miles and Snow (1978) and Porter (1980).

The underlying ‘realistic’ ontological assumptions and modernist/positivist epistemology are at the core of many approaches to and theories of the firm that have influenced strategic management research since the late 1970s (Burrell and Morgan 1979; French 2009; Johnson and Duberley 2000). This worldview follows what Burrell and Morgan (1979) call the subject–object model of inquiry (Scherer and Dowling 1995) and other modes of explanation, such as functionalism and rational choice theory (Scherer 2005). Relevant examples are transaction cost economics, agency theory (from organizational economics) and Miles and Snow’s (1978) typology of strategic action (Mir and Watson 2000). This paradigm also encompasses diverse strategy content approaches, such as the positioning school and Porter’s strategy typology, the RBV approach (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008; Mir and Watson 2000), competitive dynamics, strategy–structure streams (which originated from Chandler’s contingent approach) and the configurational approach (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008). For example, Porter’s economic theory of strategy builds on a realist ontology and a positivist epistemology, assumes (moderate) determinism (with only a minor opportunity to change structure through conduct) and uses a nomothetic methodology that combines modelling with case studies (Hoskisson *et al.* 1999; Rasche 2008; Smircich and Stubbart 1985). Although the RBV was considered to be a new paradigm (Rasche 2008; Rouse and Daelenbach 1999), Booth (1998, p. 258) concludes that ‘there are no apparent ontological, epistemological or methodological differences’ between proponents of the RBV and the ‘hitherto dominant “design”, “planning” and “positioning” schools’. French (2009, p. 64) expresses a similar viewpoint and concludes that the ideas of the RBV ‘remain firmly bounded in the linear Modernist paradigm’. Above all, the content-driven approaches to strategy share ‘assumptions of economic rationality and Newtonian conceptions of

equilibrium and stability' (MacIntosh and MacLean 1999, p. 298).

Although Furrer *et al.* (2008, p. 4) conclude that the strategy process and content approaches draw on 'very different ontological and epistemological perspectives', many strategy process approaches are part of the positivist paradigm. Examples include the planning and design schools (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008), which gather a number of positivist empirical process studies that were conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Lorange 1980; Lorange and Vancil 1977; Steiner 1979; Vancil and Lorange 1975) and Van de Ven's dialectic studies on the strategy process (Sminia 2009). Although it has been described as embracing empirical realism as a research orientation (Sminia 2009), strategy as an emergent process (Mintzberg and Waters 1985) is a different case and has been classified as part of the interpretive paradigm (Rantakari and Vaara 2016). In any case, according to Knights and Mueller (2004, p. 57), the classic process school is unable to problematize 'the clear cut separation between planning and implementation or between organization and environment'. In addition, although strategies are decided, there is 'a failure to theorize the changing identities of corporate decision makers'. Therefore, Knights and Morgan (1991, p. 267) conclude that 'despite criticisms of linear explanations of social and organizational practices', process theory 'has a leaning toward causal analysis that prevents it from following the full logic of a hermeneutic epistemology' and theorists 'still cling to certain positivist attempts to identify and perhaps measure causal processes...'. The remaining paradigms were developed in response to the dominant rational models (Calori 1998).

The contemporary realist meta-paradigm. The next meta-paradigm is labelled 'contemporary realism'. According to Cunliffe (2011), contemporary realists are a broad group, which in the case of strategy inquiry includes approaches with objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, such as critical realists (Miller and Tsang 2010) and strategy pragmatism (Powell 2002, 2003). Cunliffe (2011) also includes several other approaches in this meta-paradigm, such as critical theory and (anti-essentialist) actor network theory (ANT). However, due to the manner in which their ideas have been used in the field of strategic management, this paper focuses only on the critical realist philosophical position (and the related work of certain process theorists). For instance, although the present study acknowledges that different au-

thors view ANT as a poststructural position (Hassard and Cox 2013), strategy contributors to ANT are included in the 'transition zone' between the critical realist and interpretative worldviews. Instead, some discursive forms of critical realists are clustered in this study with critical scholars as part of the approach called critical postmodernism (Alvesson and Deetz 2006).

Among the contemporary realist approaches, interest in critical realism has been increasing (Miller and Tsang 2010). Critical realism is 'a meta-theoretical paradigm focused on explanations of the underlying "generative mechanisms or structures" that shape corporate agency and the social relations that it reproduces and transforms'; it emerged in opposition to the 'radical or strong social constructionist programme' that has underpinned the 'linguistic turn' (Reed 2005, p. 1623). However, these philosophical positions do not fully represent irreconcilable programmes. Indeed, Reed (2009, p. 97) identifies three critical realist research streams that have influenced critical management studies (CMS). First, an ethnographic stream focuses on micropolitical power relations. Second is a research stream 'combining historical, comparative and discursive forms of analysis'. Third, a final stream studies 'organizational discourses and ideologies' and the 'performative impact of discursive practices' followed by the contributors to Fairclough's (2005) critical realist approach – that is critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Starting in the early 1990s, critical realism (Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1986) became an alternative approach to organization and management research (Fleetwood 2005; Miller and Tsang 2010; Reed 2005). Departing from Giddens, Bhaskar ascribes 'primacy to structure rather than structuration' and criticizes Giddens 'for being too voluntaristic' (Pozzebon 2004, p. 251). Thus, compared to Giddens' structuration approach, 'Bhaskar's realist ontology produces a categorical distinction between human action and social structure, seeing them as fundamentally different' (Pozzebon 2004, p. 250). Although there are fewer adherents of Bhaskar than adherents of Giddens, the critical realist approach has gained support in the strategic management field but still remains underrepresented among strategy studies (Kwan and Tsang 2001; Mahoney and Snyder 1999; Miller and Tsang 2010; Tsang and Kwan 1999). For instance, in certain cases, s-as-p scholars have also applied the critical realist approach (Herepath 2014; Whittington 1989).

The interpretive meta-paradigm. The third meta-paradigm comprises studies that adopt an interpretive position or follow different degrees of constructivist engagement. As noted by Mir and Watson (2000), a trace of a constructivist position can further be found in studies by diverse scholars across the strategy communities discussed in this study (Burgelman 1983; Doz 1996; Hamel and Prahalad 1989; Kogut and Zander 1992). Indeed, strategy scholars intellectualize the interpretive paradigm as built on a spectrum of various onto-epistemological positions that range from hermeneutics, phenomenology and ethnomethodology to the Giddesian structuration theory (ST) and Bourdeausian praxeology (these last two approaches are located at the intersection of meta-paradigms). This diversity has been acknowledged by Mir and Watson (2001, p. 1173) and Kwan and Tsang (2001, p. 1164), who recognize perspectives that range from realism to relativism. In the above spectrum, located in the ‘transition zone’ (Gioia and Pitre 1990) between the contemporary realist and interpretative philosophical positions, one finds constructivist studies that adopt a ‘moderate constructivism’ compatible with realism (Blaikie 2007; Kwan and Tsang 2001). Resulting from strategy scholars’ use of different approaches to social enquiry, this view was considered to be an approach that ‘can be accommodated within a critical realist framework’ (Kwan and Tsang 2001, p. 1163).

Drawing on an idealist ontology (with a kernel of subtle realism) and a constructionist epistemology (Blaikie 2007, p. 157), the Giddesian ST approach could be located in the ‘transition zone’. By assuming ‘methodological individualism’ and ‘a Cartesian split between the mental and the physical’, this epistemological ‘building worldview’ relies on an interpretive approach. Among its premises, this view assumes that ‘knowledge is construed as the ability to represent the world around us in the mind in the form of mental images’ and sees ‘strategy making as a deliberate, intentional and goal-driven activity’. In addition, this view assumes that ‘the individual and society are construed as self-contained entities interacting externally with each other’ (Chia and Rasche 2010, p. 34).

Through Giddens, the structurationist perspective ‘was already influential in management and organization studies, particularly as encapsulated in “processual” approaches’ (Johnson *et al.* 2007, p. 15), as shown by Pozzebon’s (2004) review. For instance, being influenced by the work of Giddens and subscribing to the social constructionist worldview, Pet-

tigrew’s (1997) processual analysis has been described as adopting a critical realist research orientation (Sminia 2009; Sminia and de Rond 2012). A germ of a constructivist position can also be found in the scaffolding of institutional theory (Scott 1987) and new institutionalism, for instance, through Giddens’ ideas (Edwards 2016) and Bourdeau’s influence (Dimaggio and Powell 1991). The article by Oakes *et al.* (1998) is an example of strategy research (Prasad 2005). In addition, some s-as-p studies have used the institutional macro-mechanisms that underlie behaviours to understand the interplay between individual activities at the micro-level, the organization at the meso-level and the organizational field at the macro-level (Suddaby *et al.* 2013).

The Giddesian ST is particularly present in the ‘conventional distinction between praxis and practice’ (Whittington 2010, p. 119) and constitutes, with the Bordieusian praxeology (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) and de Certeau’s theory on practice (de Certeau 1984), a central component of the conceptual scaffolding of the first generation of s-as-p studies that focus on social practices and on how managers actually implement strategy, or the ‘doings’ in strategy (Whittington 1996, 2003, 2018). Indeed, ST became a key approach to study the interplay between micro-activities and macro-outcomes and abandon the dichotomist view on the structure–action debate (Seidl and Whittington 2014). Whittington (2010) shows how insights from the Giddesian approach have been extensively applied (Kaplan 2008; Mantere 2008; Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007) and combined with other theories, such as dynamic capabilities (Salvato 2003), sensemaking (Balogun and Johnson 2005; Rouleau 2005) and institutional theory (Jarzabkowski 2008).

Many s-as-p studies have also followed the interpretive paradigm (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008) to create different understandings of practice and strategy based on social constructionist epistemology (Balogun 2005; Wolf and Floyd 2013) and on ‘intimate methodologies’ (e.g. ethnographic methods), whereas other studies use alternative epistemological approaches (Chia and Rasche 2010) or different degrees of constructivist engagement (Grand *et al.* 2010). The interpretive onto-epistemological position is maintained by the work of different scholars involved in decision-making and strategy process research, which ‘emphasizes interpretative approaches to managerial cognition and enactment’ (Booth 1998, p. 259). Favouring the idea of a ‘socially created symbolic world’ that abandons ‘concrete, material

organizations/environments' (Smircich and Stubbart 1985, p. 727), 'interpretive research uncovers, describes and theoretically interprets actual meanings that people use in real settings' (Gephart 2004, p. 457). Illustrations can be found in cognitive and sensemaking studies (Barr *et al.* 1992; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Weick *et al.* 2005), although sensemaking scholars have mixed onto-epistemological assumptions and oscillate and act over time like '... interpretivists, functionalist, radical humanists, and radical structuralist' (Weick 1995, p. 35). Some s-as-p scholars have used the Weickian idea of sensemaking to scrutinize strategizing processes from the bottom up, where middle managers' cognition plays an active role in retrospectively and prospectively constructing the emergent strategic logic of an organization through collective and socially constructed processes of shared understanding and sensemaking (Rouleau 2005; Rouleau and Balogun 2011).

Other s-as-p studies that apply Vygotsky's (1978) activity theory and the situated learning approach (Lave and Wenger 1991) are also part of the interpretive paradigm (Jarzabkowski 2003, 2005; Miettinen and Virkkunen 2005; Orlikowski 2002). Increasingly popular among scholars in the social practice stream of s-as-p (Balogun *et al.* 2015; Denis *et al.* 2007) is the ANT approach (Callon 1986; Latour 1987), which 'adopts a semiotic of materiality' to examine the link between 'human and non-human actors', where non-human actors are referred to as 'objects' (Cunliffe 2011, p. 655). Along with technology studies in information systems research and the activity theory of Vygotsky and Leontiev, the Latourian ANT provides the philosophical foundations for a corpus of scholarship known as *sociomateriality* (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan 2015; Kaplan 2011; Orlikowski 2007). This stream of research understands relations as the primary explanatory means of the inquiry, challenging the ontological assumption of technology-human separation, advocating for a relational ontology (Orlikowski and Scott 2018) and studying how technologies affect organizations and their strategizing sociomaterial practices.

The critical postmodernist meta-paradigm. The last onto-epistemological space embraces the work of critical and postmodernist intellectuals (including poststructuralism). The critical research on strategy typically builds on the work of scholars from the so-called Frankfurt School and many postmodernist intellectuals. Accordingly, the last paradigm is labelled critical postmodernism (Boje 1995; Gephart

2004) and comprises 'critical and postmodern approaches to strategy' (Booth 1998, p. 259). Critical postmodernism 'describes dominant and subordinated meanings, displays the power implications of meanings, and encourages critical reflexivity to make people aware of the constraints on their own meanings and actions. Critical reflexivity provides a means for emancipation from structures of domination' (Gephart 2004, p. 457). Nevertheless, some connections exist (in a transition zone) with the third paradigm. For instance, Gomez (2010) discusses how the Bourdieusian structuration-like approach (Bourdieu 1977, 1990), which ascribes to a (structural) constructivist epistemology, can be combined with the critical position and is an alternative option for discussing the primacy of agency or structure in shaping human behaviour that has also been used in s-as-p research (Chia and Holt 2006; Chia and MacKay 2007).

Indications of the application of the critical postmodernist approach to strategy can be traced back to the early 1990s and are based mainly on the work of many critical organization theorists (Alvesson and Willmott 1995; Barry and Elmes 1997; Booth 2000; Knights and Morgan 1991; Knights and Mueller 2004; Thomas 1998). Phillips and Dar (2009) distinguish four perspectives, namely, strategy as political economy at the macro level of analysis, strategy as ideology at the macro level, strategy as discourse at the meso/micro level and strategy as practice at the micro level. The two 'macro-level' strands are the least exemplified in strategy research. Strategy as political economy constitutes an alternative line of inquiry to criticize strategic thinking based on the Gramscian (historical-materialist hegemonic) perspective (Gramsci 1971), which emphasizes the importance of the economic context and advocates for the indivisibility of markets and politics in regard to understanding strategy and intrinsic asymmetrical power relations (Levy *et al.* 2003). Inspired by the structuration theory of Giddens (1979), Levy *et al.* (2003) define a 'modernist study' of Shrivastava (1986) that is among the best-known uses of the notion of strategy as an ideology in strategic management; accordingly, strategy is defined as an instrument that serves the interest of strategizing (top) managers. Later, Thomas (1998) also defines the strategy field as an ideological *mélange*.

The strategy-as-discourse stream typically represents the postmodern worldview based on a 'Foucauldian' genealogical ontology (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008; Hardy and Thomas 2014; Knights and

Morgan 1991; Sminia 2009). However, this perspective covers a spectrum of onto-epistemological positions oriented towards a subjectivist epistemology (Chia and Rasche 2010) and involves different approaches that emphasize the use of the discourse analysis method based on different discursive theories (Balogun *et al.* 2014; Vaara 2010). In agreement with the radical humanism paradigm (Burrell and Morgan 1979) and inspired by Foucault's work, Alvesson and Deetz's (2006) so-called critical management studies (CMS) challenge the 'authority of managerialism' and identify 'discourse as a coherent system of knowledge that rules in certain ways of thinking, doing, and being' (Phillips *et al.* 2008, p. 778).

In the early 2000s, different discourse approaches within the 'linguistic turn' in social sciences were seen as both an important avenue for expanding the s-as-p research agenda (Seidl and Whittington 2014, p. 1408) and 'building a distinctive identity' (Vaara and Whittington 2012, p. 290). At the micro level of analysis (though evolving towards the macro-micro connection) and out of the traditional scope of the conventional CMS, this research blends cognitive approaches to discourse analysis with s-as-p research (Phillips and Dar 2009) and emphasizes the performative role of discourse and organizations as polyphonic entities, which leads to the presence of various voices that compete for power. Thus, this approach may enable a critical understanding of how strategy discourse creates 'regimes of truth and power positions' (Vaara 2010, p. 30). This discourse-oriented stream of s-as-p research also involves several methodological positions.

By embracing ethnomethodology to analyse practices through conversation analysis (CA), Samra-Fredericks (2005) builds on Habermas' (1979, 1984) work to understand how speaking privileges allow strategy makers to collaboratively construct power (Nicolini 2012). Moreover, influenced by Foucault (Phillips *et al.* 2008), other scholars (Vaara *et al.* 2010) follow Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis (CDA) and take a critical realist stance towards the analysed text, which moves the inquiry away from the relativist discursive form (Vaara 2010). Thus, CDA views the use of language 'as a form of social practice' that 'is shaped and constrained by social structures' and 'simultaneously shapes the structures that constrain it' (Phillips *et al.* 2008, p. 771). Instead, by applying rhetorical analysis, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) build on the neo-institutional approach to discuss alterna-

tive strategies of legitimacy. Finally, narrative analysis (Bakhtin 1986; Boje 2001, 2008; Czarniawska 2004) is an alternative fertile approach that explores strategizing based on storytelling (Vaara 2010). A pioneering example in the strategy context is the work of Barry and Elmes (1997), and narrative analysis has also gained interest among s-as-p scholars in recent years (Fenton and Langley 2011; Küpers *et al.* 2013; Vaara and Tienari 2011).

Other alternatives were also explored. Building on the Heideggerian phenomenology and breaking with the traditional actor-centred approach embedded in the 'first generation' of s-as-p studies (Nicolini 2012, pp. 21–22), scholars such as Chia, Holt and MacKay (Chia and Holt 2006; Chia and MacKay 2007) support the adoption of what Nicolini (2012) refers to as the 'strong' approach to s-as-p. Under this worldview, 'identities and characteristics of persons are not deemed to pre-exist social interactions and social practices' and 'social practices themselves are given primacy over individual agency and intention' (Chia and Rasche 2010, p. 34). Some s-as-p studies have also applied the idea of language games (Wittgenstein 1951), which see strategy as emerging from coupled language games governed by context-specific norms and where vocabularies and meanings are considered context-specific and not transferable to other contexts and discourses (Mantere 2013; Seidl 2007). Finally, although less prevalent, Derrida's (1972) deconstruction was also applied to strategy research; Rasche (2008) is an example of the use of this way of thinking.

Discussion and conclusions

The strategy field has been opening up for the last 20 years, which has resulted in many fresh research topics and concepts and the acceptance of several different philosophical assumptions and methodologies. Methodologies such as action research, ethnographic research, narrative and discourse analysis, and interventionist studies have increasingly been utilized. Although our initial assumptions pointed to the existence of a multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic field, positivist research, quantitative and (to a small extent) qualitative, has strongly dominated the strategy field and kept the research domain in its 'straitjacket' (Bettis 1991) for decades. Indeed, many scholars still consider strategic management as a single paradigm and suggest that theory is science only if it meets 'Popper's falsifiability criterion' (Bettis

and Blettner 2020, p. 85). These circumstances call for a deeper philosophical debate.

In this context, the present review sets out to understand how different approaches to social enquiry have been used in strategy research and how the main paradigms engage with strategy. The key tasks include the delimitation of the key onto-epistemological spaces and the recognition of the different philosophical positions within them. These tasks mean not only understanding how the spaces could be delimited based on pre-existing paradigmatic discussions, but also understanding how the paradigmatic discussion has advanced in the field of organizational inquiry; this debate was established in the field over a decade ago, in contrast to the field of strategic management.

Unlike most previous paradigmatic discussions in the strategy field that matched paradigms to theories or schools of thought, this review considers a paradigm to be a complete view of reality (Morgan 1980). As a result, four onto-epistemological spaces conceptualized as meta-paradigms emerged from the analysis, which were labelled contemporary positivist, contemporary realist, interpretive and critical postmodernist. The first meta-paradigm – the contemporary positivist – is the dominant view in strategy. It embraces approaches that share realist ontological assumptions and the modernist/positivist epistemology and a few taken-for-granted underlying assumptions such as the ideas of fit and adaptation view, which reduce the context to a set of contingent variables. Thus, organizations, their resources and their (objective, unique and deterministic) environments are conceived as given and detached entities; their relationships follow quasi-universal fixed causal laws that apply across time and space.

The second meta-paradigm is the contemporary realist, which comprises approaches with objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, such as critical realists and strategy pragmatism. In particular, critical realism focuses on explanations of the underlying structures (mechanisms) that form agency and the social relations that it reproduces and transforms. Third, the interpretive paradigm builds on a spectrum of various onto-epistemological positions and is maintained by scholars with different degrees of constructivist engagement that leave behind material and concrete organizations/environments and use intimate methodologies. This meta-paradigm covers positions ranging from hermeneutics, phenomenology and ethnomethodology to Giddesian structuration theory (ST), as well as cognitive studies and

new institutionalism. Finally, the critical postmodernist meta-paradigm embraces the work of critical and postmodernist intellectuals (including poststructuralism). Thus, the fourth meta-paradigm covers a spectrum of onto-epistemological positions oriented towards constructivist and subjectivist epistemologies and involves several methodological positions, many of which embrace ethnomethodology or phenomenology and emphasize the use of the discourse analysis method.

Considering the above meta-paradigms, the present discussion section addresses the following questions: (1) What is the degree of maturity of the philosophical debate in the strategy research? (2) How can scholars incorporate the findings of the present review in the future development of strategy research?

The meta-paradigms and philosophical debate in the field

Each of the four onto-epistemological spaces (meta-paradigms) covers several coexisting positions. Consequently, different ‘paradigms’ (as traditionally defined in the strategy field) might emerge through the dissection of each meta-paradigm if one applies the model problem type of the definition (Rasche 2008), accepts the idea of weak incommensurability (Booth 1998) and equates the concept of paradigms to theories (Davis 2010; Donaldson 1996). Taking the contemporary positivist paradigm as a case in point, the dissection requires an exploration of the differences between the strategy process and content approaches, which ‘address different phenomena’, and entails a distinction between content theories (e.g. the market and resource-based views) that ‘address the same *explanandum* phenomenon using widely explanatory apparatuses’ (Foss 1996a, p. 4). In this context, the analyst faces a ‘superficial’ pluralism because there is a convergence in which most of the paradigms favour ‘almost the same dominant meta-theoretical assumptions... largely stemming from the functionalist roots of the field’ (Rasche 2008, p. 98). The designation of schools with similar meta-theoretical worldviews as alternative paradigms may lead scholars to consider ‘readjustments within functionalism’ (Johnson and Duberley 2000, p. 88) as paradigm shifts (see Campbell-Hunt 2000, p. 127; Furrer *et al.* 2008, p. 11; Løwendahl and Revang 1998, p. 767; Teece *et al.* 1997, p. 510).

The remaining three meta-paradigms could also be divided into different positions. For instance, the

contemporary realist meta-paradigm could be divided into critical realism and pragmatism and the critical postmodernist meta-paradigm into postmodernist, poststructuralism, feminist and postcolonialism. Moreover, the interpretive meta-paradigm builds on a spectrum of various onto-epistemological positions that encompass traditions that range from hermeneutics, phenomenology and ethnomethodology to the Giddesian structuration theory (ST), which are all recognized as paradigms by Blaikie (2007, p. 27).

As a result, the four meta-paradigms can be dissected into many paradigms, whose number, in taking the exercise to the limit, would equal the total number of strategy schools or even theories. As Eckberg and Hill (1980, p. 123) conclude, 'the sociological pie can be sliced in many ways'. Even when strategy theories are considered paradigms, there has only been a scattered philosophical debate in the strategy field, and a 'paradigm war' has not occurred. Given that the rational and emergent traditions are built on very different sets of basic assumptions, the debate between them in the early 1990s (Ansoff 1991; Mintzberg 1990a,b, 1991) not only is a case in point but also shows that these alternative streams have an 'inability to satisfactorily communicate' (Foss 1996a, p. 6). Another example is the debate on the fundamentals of resource-based theory (Barney 2001a; Priem and Butler 2001a,b). Feldman (2020) provides another illustration based on the debate between academics from the IO and RBV traditions, which materialized in a series of variance decomposition studies looking for evidence on the importance of industry and business unit effects on company performance. These debates resemble, for instance, the debate on organizational inquiry between the 'environmental determinism' proposed by contingency theorists and population ecologists (Aldrich 1979; Dess and Beard 1986) and the 'managerial voluntarism' proposed by strategic choice scholars (Child 1972, 1997; Friend and Hickling 2005). Of course, there have been discussions at the philosophical level (Durand 2002; Kwan and Tsang 2001; Mir and Watson 2000, 2001; Powell 2001, 2002), but most of them took place within the meta-paradigms rather than between them.

In any case, the coexistence of alternative paradigms introduces another difficult-to-resolve debate that has been taking place in organizational inquiry around the concept of incommensurability. The debate on incommensurability remains problematic, reveals no consensual solution and exposes an in-

finite regression of arguments. As in organization studies, the controversies over incommensurability in strategy research find different postures (Shepherd and Challenger 2013). Isolationists aim to safeguard theoretical pluralism through an isolated evolution of incommensurable paradigms, whereas paradigm selection is a choice of belief that accepts the insolubility of incommensurability that comes from a strong commitment to ontological and epistemological assumptions (Jackson and Carter 1991). Scholars have also proposed a back-to-basics approach (Camerer 1985; Donaldson 1996) that empowers the hegemony of the functionalist paradigm (Scherer and Dowling 1995; Scherer and Steinmann 1999) and the role of scientific gatekeepers to ensure the integration and congruence of the scientific field (Pfeffer 1993).

Pluralists instead support a multiparadigmatic state and call for a dialogue in which all voices can be heard as a necessary condition for knowledge accumulation (Foss 1996b; Mahoney 1993; Pettigrew *et al.* 2002; Rumelt *et al.* 1994; Schoemaker 1993; Spender 1992; Thomas and Pruett 1993). By accepting incommensurability and rejecting isolationism, this position is a midpoint between the relativism of anything goes and the dogmatism of back-to-basics and creates a level of consensus among strategic management scholars (Scherer 1998; Scherer and Dowling 1995). Similarly, advocates of integration (Combe 1999; Cravens *et al.* 1997; Durand *et al.* 2017; Hart 1992) consider the sum of multiple paradigms to be better than a single paradigm. Critiques of this approach claim that this integration includes the sum of the gaps in each paradigm and thus yields a sum worse than its separate perspectives while providing little rationale for which paradigms to integrate and neglect to address the reconcilability of incommensurable perspectives, which leaves substantial space for subjectivity and insufficient recommendations for reasoning (Scherer 1998). Integrationist efforts exist, but they typically integrate theories within the positivist paradigm (Foss 1999). Indeed, the meta-paradigms and the in-depth examination of the underlying and meta-theoretical assumptions of the main approaches may provide a sound conceptual base to think about integration in a multiparadigmatic field in which onto-epistemological boundaries are vanishing.

In summary, meta-paradigms have evolved in isolation, with only a small number of concrete bridges. As noted by Davis (2010), in organizational inquiry, strategy meta-paradigms do not compete with one another to account for the same regularities or events,

which leads to the fragmentation of the strategy domain (Leiblein and Reuer 2020). Despite the clear dominance of the positivist paradigm, the above situation has resulted in a ‘fragmented adhocracy’ (Whitley 1984b) that comprises sharply bounded communities that draw on different disciplines, assumptions and terminologies, which may hinder the integration of the results (Whitley 1984a). Given these circumstances, recognizing that supposedly different approaches share some meta-theoretical worldviews is the first step to finding bridges and dialogues within the same meta-paradigm. Thus, the acknowledgement of areas of dialogue between meta-paradigms (or theories with different meta-theoretical assumptions) constitutes a relevant implication resulting from the identification of the meta-paradigms.

Looking to the future

The findings of this review not only provide support for scholars and doctoral students by helping them navigate the foggy path of the philosophy of science in a puzzling research landscape but also can be used as a tool to extend strategy research. Open to multidisciplinary ideas, ‘the field of strategic management is defined not by any particular theoretical paradigm’ (Makadok *et al.* 2018, p. 1530) but rather by a few main canonical questions about differences in firms’ behaviour and performance, and the role of and value added by firms’ top (and middle) management (Leiblein and Reuer 2020; Rumelt *et al.* 1994). Under these circumstances, most conceptual contributions in strategic management do not initiate a radical paradigm shift but rather illuminate and advance theories (either received or imported). Different ontological positions will continue to coexist, and ways to create synergies that result in better answers to current and future canonical questions must be found.

Looking ahead, there is an opportunity to further explore some avenues already proposed by researchers in organization studies and strategy. Examples range from replacing paradigms with discourses (Deetz 1996) to looking for spaces for dialogue (Gioia and Pitre 1990) and trading zones (Booth 2000). They also include creating a reference system that acts as a democratically created dictionary (McKinley and Mone 1998) and adopting a Campbellian realist philosophical position (McKelvey 1999), which is aligned with the constructivist position of Mir and Watson (2000) and occupies a space characterized by ontological realism and epis-

temological relativism. Alternatively, Rasche (2008, p. 49) suggests the ‘loose coupling’ approach, which allows researchers ‘to accept the logic of different paradigms (and thus incommensurability) without losing sight of the whole’. Finally, Drnevich *et al.* (2020, p. 39) advocate for the strategy field’s return to its primary focus on management practice that leads to ‘scientifically rigorous and practically relevant research that both develops new theoretical contributions and bridges the theory–practice gap’. These authors strongly encourage researchers to adopt an abductive ‘problem-focused scholarly discovery logic’ embracing the philosophy of pragmatism (Dewey 1938) and theoretical and methodological pluralism, including more qualitative and process research (such as research that was conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, in the early stages of the field’s development).

Most conceptual contributions in strategic management typically occur in a theoretical space and from incremental changes in elements of the theorizing process (Makadok *et al.* 2018). Therefore, exposing and discussing the assumptions in strategic management may serve as a guide for future conceptual development. Consequently, the present study can inform theorizing in diverse manners. First, in the construction of new research questions (or the modification of existing ones). Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) introduce problematization, a concept that aims to construct research questions from existing literature by identifying and challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the prevailing theories through dialectical interrogation. Stimulated by the paradigm debate, these authors recognize different types of assumptions open to problematization. For instance, the in-home unproblematic assumptions shared within a research stream, root metaphors or broader images about the subject matter, paradigmatic assumptions (ontology, epistemology and methodology), ideology (moral-, political- and gender-related) and field assumptions shared by many research streams (within a paradigm or even across paradigms, e.g. rationality vs. bounded rationality). Although impactful theories most typically originate from challenging any of the latter three types of broader assumptions, challenging these types of premises is difficult and requires deepness and precision. Although some approaches to inquiry, such as social constructionism, postmodernism and critical theory, often favour problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011), problematization is not the dominant methodology in strategy research.

Second, even in cases where the research questions do not emerge from problematization, understanding the assumptions underlying theories plays a crucial role in determining their boundary conditions, which defines when a theory does or does not work and opens up opportunities for conceptual development. Mastering these core assumptions is needed to expose internal inconsistencies between assumptions in one theory, identify logical inconsistencies between theories, and relax or restrict the underlying assumptions of one approach to apply it more broadly or to obtain more specific implications (Makadok *et al.* 2018). Thus, the core assumptions affect boundary conditions and, consequently, determine outputs. 'The more specific the assumptions and boundary conditions become, the more specific the output can be' (Makadok *et al.* 2018, p. 1539). For instance, claim that research on s-as-p must assume a 'post-processual stance' that 'goes beyond that of a sympathetic extension of the strategy process perspective'. Such a stance must (1) place ontological primacy on practices rather than actors, (2) philosophically privilege practice complexes rather than actors and things as the locus of analysis and (3) make the locus of explanation the field of practices rather than the intentions of individuals and organizations.

Making explicit the underlying assumptions also determines many other elements of the theorizing process (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011), whereas a contribution may come from adapting the assumptions to apply a given theory at a different level or context than it originated or to understand a different phenomenon. The assumptions underlying mainstream strategic management theories were developed in the past. This situation calls for further conceptual development to better understand contemporary strategic management and to address novel phenomena such as those emerging from the increasingly rapid changes in the economic, political, social and technological environments (He *et al.* 2020; Teece 2020). Finally, a phenomenon can be addressed with different onto-epistemological approaches (e.g. using different philosophical assumptions). For instance, Wenzel *et al.* (2020) use a constructivist/processual approach grounded on a practice perspective to illuminate the dynamics within dynamic capabilities, a conception of organizational routines that usually implicates a positivist/entitative onto-epistemology.

Limitations

The ambitious scope of the present study also implicates limitations. Specifically, a thorough and exhaustive analysis and discussion of each sociological paradigm and all strategy theories is unmanageable in a limited space and goes beyond the objectives of this paper. Given the need to condense the analysis, the paradigmatic representation is not unequivocal, can be overly simplistic and may neglect relevant differences between different schools within the meta-paradigms. This limitation may diminish the importance of or exclude pertinent approaches. For instance, the systemic and processual-oriented chaos theory (Levy 1994; Stacey 1995) and the microfoundations stream (Abell *et al.* 2008; Felin *et al.* 2015) offer distinctive premises and explicit, consistent and articulated 'core logics' (Lengnick-Hall and Wolff 1999, p. 1110). Likewise, other approaches, such as the 'pragmatist' stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984), game theory and social capital theory, may deserve a more detailed analysis. Presumably, there are also some limitations to our classification of scholars into theories, schools and paradigms. These classifications are influenced by the authors' interpretations, preferences and (lack of) knowledge and skills. We hope that the paper will encourage a debate that is not limited to scholars who may be (or feel) inappropriately classified.

Appendix

The above-listed theories coincide with the theories pointed out by previous review studies as the most relevant in strategic management (Furrer *et al.* 2008; Kenworthy and Verbeke 2015; Nerur *et al.* 2008; Ramos-Rodríguez and Ruiz-Navarro 2004). However, understanding the manner in which researchers construct the 'world of strategy' based on the different assumptions that they attach to their strategic realities (Rasche 2008, p. 3) is a necessary step in the identification of paradigms. Accordingly, Table 3 summarizes the basic assumptions included in the 'Kuhnian' model problem of the above-identified approaches to strategy (Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix offer an in-depth look at the basic assumptions that underlie the endogenous approaches).

Table A1. Brief interpretation of the co-citation analysis

Cluster	Focus	Streams	Main topics	Representative authors from the co-citation network	Main theoretical underpinnings
#1	Corporate governance and strategy, strategic leadership and corporate strategy	Corporate governance	Ownership structure and diversification; executive compensation; board monitoring and incentives; the role, composition, number and structure of the board of directors. All with a special emphasis on their impact on performance.	Alchian, Demsetz, Fama, Jensen, Meckling, Daily, Certo, Dalton, Camella, Hambrick, Zajac, Westphal, Carpenter, Hillman, Gómez-Mejía, Lubatkin	- Agency theory - Resource dependence theory - Institutional theory
				Rindova Donaldson, Davies Freeman, Donaldson, Mitroff, Preston	- Cognitive perspectives - Stewardship theory - Stakeholder theory
				Finkelstein, Hambrick, Mason, Carpenter, Camella, Sanders	- Strategic choice approach - Behavioural theory and behavioural strategy - Upper echelons theory
			Ethics in corporate governance.		
#2	Strategic decision-making and strategy process	Corporate strategy	The role, characteristics (age, composition and size) and behaviour (experiences, knowledge, values, cognition, biases and feelings) of top management teams and top executives in explaining organizational behaviour and strategy and outcomes.	Hitt, Hoskisson, Boyd, Dacin, Arregle, Levitas	- Resource-based view and organizational learning - Contingency theory - Stakeholder theory - Transaction costs theory - Institutional theory - Rational (deliberated) strategy process
				Andrews (design school), Ansoff (planning school), Lorange, Vancil, Steiner	
				Mintzberg, Quinn, Waters Bower, Burgelman	- Strategy as an emergent process - Iterated process of resource allocation
			Strategy process, contextual influences and managerial agency.		

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued

Cluster	Focus	Streams	Main topics	Representative authors from the co-citation network	Main theoretical underpinnings
			A holistic multi-process and multi-level explanation to understand the link between process and outcome. Strategy as a bargaining process. The role of middle management. 'Social practice' stream (politicizing practices). Sensemaking. Sociomaterial practices, and Practice-driven institutionalism. Discursive aspects of practice.	Chandler (SSP), Burns, Stalker, Lawrence, Lorsch, Thompson, Galbraith, Bower, Miles, Snow, Miller, Friesen, Dess, Romanelli, Hrebiniak, Van de Ven Pettigrew	- Contingency theory, the concept of 'fit' and the configurational view of strategy - The processual approach
				Child Floyd, Wooldridge Whittington, Jarzabkowski, Balogun, Johnson, Melin, Langley, Rouleau	- Strategic choice - Process approach - ANT - Structuration theory and praxology
		Strategy-as-practice (s-as-p)		Vaara, Vesa, Tienari, Samra-Fredericks Cyert, March, Simon	- Sensemaking - Critical theory and critical discourse - Behavioural theory
		Strategic decision-making	Bounded rationality. Decision-making and choice, the application of cognitive and social psychology to strategic management.	Huff, Barr, Stimper, Porac, Reger, Fiegenbaum	- Decision making and choice
				Weick, Gioia, Chittipeddi, Dutton, Thomas, Roberts Kahneman, Tversky, Bromiley Lovallo, Shwenk Stubbart, Daniels, Hodgkinson, Johnson Ocasio Staw Salancick, Meindl Daff, Argyris, Duncan, Weiss, Weick, Levitt, March	- Sensemaking and identity (schema, images) - Prospect theory - Behavioural decision theory - Managerial cognition - Attention - Escalation - Attribution - Organizational learning

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued

Cluster	Focus	Streams	Main topics	Representative authors from the co-citation network	Main theoretical underpinnings
#3	The subjects of strategic decisions, recognizing competitive advantage as the secret to success.	Market-based view	Firm's market behaviour and positioning as sources of competitive advantage.	Porter, Caves, Hunt, Buzze, Bradley, Sultan, Gale, Henderson	- IO (SCP) and the positioning approach
				Smith, Grimm, Gannon, Chen, D'Aveni	- Competitive dynamics and hyper-competition
				Burgelman, Barnett, Levinthal	- Ecological approaches (partial adjustment)
		Resource-based view	Firm's unique resources and capabilities as sources of competitive advantage.	Barney, Peteraf, Wernerfelt	- Resource-based view
#4	Business/corporate international strategy formulation and implementation, decision-making and political risk, and strategic networks and alliances	Knowledge-based view		Cohen, Levinthal, Grant, Kogut, Zander, Nonaka, Takeuchi	- Knowledge-based view
		Dynamic capabilities view		Teece, Eisenhardt, Martin, Helfat	- Kirznerian, Schumpeterian and evolutionary theories of economic change
		Technological innovation, knowledge acquisition and the new competition school	Sources of innovation, technological competences, trajectories of capabilities development, absorptive capacity, dominant designs.	Nelson, Winter, Levinthal, Cohen, Pavitt, Henderson, Clark, Baldwin, Cockburn, Utterback, Suárez, Tushman, Albertany, Langois, Christensen, von Hippel	- Evolutionary theory of the firm
					- Institutional theory
					- Schumpeterian theory
		Global strategy and international management	Internationalization strategy, international diversification, entry decisions and entry modes, organizational models, HQ–subsidiary relations, international joint ventures, and mergers and acquisitions.	Johanson, Vahlne	- Internationalization process (Uppsala)

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued

Cluster	Focus	Streams	Main topics	Representative authors from the co-citation network	Main theoretical underpinnings
				Dunning Barkema, Hennart, Buckley, Casson, Rugman, Verbeke, Luo, Bartlett, Goshal	- Eclectic theory (IO) - Transaction cost economics
				Capron, Dussauge, Mitchel, Peng, Wassmer, Luo, Birkinshaw -Kogut, Zander, Madhok, Barkema, Vermeulen, Inkpen, Delios, Beamish, Zollo	- Resource-based view - KBV/organizational learning
				Inkpen, Beamish, Harrigan, Peng Khanna, Kostova, Roth, Zaheer, Dacin, Peng, Palepu Bartlett, Goshal	- Resource dependence theory - Institutional theory
				Li, Zhou, Shao, Zhang, Pezeshkan Dyer, Gulati, Hennart, Das, Teng	- Contingency theory - Social network theory - Transaction cost economics
	Strategic networks and alliances		Network structure, network position and performance, tie density and network structure, trust and partner selection, and cooperation and learning.	Burt, Coleman, Koka, Das, Teng Dyer, Singh, Gulati, Kale, Ahuja, Zaheer, Das, Teng Reuer, Singh, Zollo, Inkpen, Kogut, Zander, Kale, Singh Pharke, Rosenthal, Chandram Dyer, Singh	- Social capital theory - RBV + dynamic capabilities - KBV/organizational learning - Game theory (+ transaction costs) - The relational view

Table A2. The basic premises of the main strategy content traditions

School	The positioning school ^a	The competitive dynamic approach ^b	The resource-based view ^c	The dynamic capabilities view ^d
Basic assumptions	<p>(i) Industry structure determines competition and profitability (in particular, market imperfections are used to understand profitability). The central concerns are existing structural conditions and competitors' positioning.</p> <p>(ii) Strategies are generic and tangible in the market.</p> <p>(iii) Market rationale is highly economical (efficient and well-defined markets, equilibrium).</p> <p>(iv) The strategy formulation process involves an analytical (primarily quantitative) appraisal of competitors and the industry as a whole.</p> <p>(v) The role of the (rational) analyst is crucial.</p> <p>(vi) (Exogenous) industrial structure dictates corporate strategy.</p> <p>(vii) The corporate strategy is then translated into divisional strategies, which, in turn, determine the organizational structures most suitable for accomplishing the intended results.</p> <p>(viii) There exists a short-run capacity for strategic reorientation.</p>	<p>(i) Managers are hyper-rational.</p> <p>(ii) Firms and products are the core units of analysis; industries are not a core unit because the role of the industrial structure is endogenous.</p> <p>(iii) Competition is rapidly changing and agile/proactive, and effective responses to these changes determine firm performance.</p> <p>(iv) Companies have a high capacity for 'short-run' strategic reorientation.</p> <p>(v) Although the role of market power is emphasized, the focus is on strategic actions and responses, which replace generic strategies and determine the relationship between strategy and structure.</p> <p>(vi) Competitive advantages are not sustainable in the long term but rather are transient and time-dependent (transitory and ephemeral). Temporary advantages result from continuous and nonlinear disruption and disequilibrium, which must be deliberately created by companies.</p>	<p>(i) The economic actor is boundedly rational and a utility maximizer.</p> <p>(ii) Similar to neoclassical economics, economic (competitive) equilibrium is a benchmark for welfare analysis (well-defined and efficient markets).</p> <p>(iii) Firms are heterogeneous; resources and capabilities are often asymmetrically distributed and are not perfectly mobile across firms. Resource heterogeneity is a function of the firm's history (path dependence) and may be long lasting (sustained over time).</p> <p>(iv) Valuable (rare, imperfectly imitable and substitutable) resources and capabilities allow firms to generate a sustainable competitive advantage.</p> <p>(v) The role of the industrial structure is endogenous.</p> <p>(vi) The value of companies' resources and capabilities is determined by the market context within which these companies operate. Market continuity and predictability are two basic assumptions.</p>	<p>(i) Managers are rational.</p> <p>(ii) Difficult-to-imitate and difficult-to-replicate dynamic capabilities allow firms to generate a sustainable competitive advantage.</p> <p>(iii) Dynamic capabilities are highly firm-specific, shaped by the firm's asset positions and moulded by its evolutionary and co-evolutionary paths.</p> <p>(iv) Although the ultimate unit of analysis comprises 'processes, positions and path', the DCV's main concern is 'asset accumulation, replicability and inimitability'.</p> <p>(v) The role of the industrial structure is endogenous.</p> <p>(vi) Companies have a low capacity for 'short-run' strategic reorientation.</p>

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued

School	The positioning school ^a	The competitive dynamic approach ^b	The resource-based view ^c	The dynamic capabilities view ^d
			(vii) Barriers to initiating a valuable resource determine the sustainability of above-normal returns and are a function of the degree of unobservability of these resources.	
			(viii) Markets can vary in their competitiveness, and information can change in terms of how it is diffused across a market, but firms must acquire needed resources and capabilities in imperfectly competitive markets when seeking economic rents.	
			(ix) Some resources and capabilities are inelastic in supply. Occasionally, the markets for these resources do not exist due to social complexity (they cannot be bought and sold) and because they are often path dependent and can be developed only over long periods.	

Source: Based on

^aMintzberg (1990a, p. 127), Rialp-Criado (2003, p. 201), Foss and Ishikawa (2007) and Teece *et al.* (1997, p. 527).

^bTeece *et al.* (1997, p. 527), Chen and Miller (2012, p. 139), Lengnick-Hall and Wolff (1999) and D'Aveni *et al.* (2010).

^cGodfrey and Hill (1995), Barney (2001b), Mahoney and Pandian (1992), Teece *et al.* (1997), Kraaijenbrink *et al.* (2010) and Foss and Ishikawa (2007).

^dTeece *et al.* (1997, p. 527).

Table A3. The basic premises of the main strategy process traditions

School	Andrews (1971) and the design school ^a	Ansoff (1965) and the planning school ^a	Strategy as an emergent process ^b	The processual approach ^c	Strategy-as-practice approach ^{d,e}
Basic assumptions	<p>(i) Strategy formulation is a rational, conscious and controlled process.</p> <p>(ii) The general manager is entirely responsible for this process.</p> <p>(iii) The model of strategic formulation should be as simple and informal as possible.</p> <p>(iv) The strategies should be unique (highly firm specific) and the result of a singular creative process.</p> <p>(v) Strategies should be explicated and articulated.</p> <p>(vi) The strategies can be implemented only after they are fully formulated.</p>	<p>(i) Strategy formulation is a rational and formal process divided into several stages, each of which is clearly identified by control systems and supported by planning techniques.</p> <p>(ii) The general manager is responsible for the formulation process, but during implementation, responsibility is shared with the planners.</p> <p>(iii) The strategies should be highly explicated, including objectives, goals, activities and budgets.</p> <p>(iv) For a plan to be successful, a stable environment is needed.</p>	<p>(i) The combination of complex and dynamic organizational environments and the need for internal diffusion of basic knowledge regarding how to craft a strategy excludes the possibility of exerting deliberate control. Therefore, strategy creation must take the form of a learning process over time wherein the formation of the strategy and its implementation generally become indistinguishable processes.</p> <p>(ii) Although the leader must learn – and occasionally he/she is the person who truly learns – it is common for the system as a whole to learn; consequently, there are many potential strategists in most organizations.</p> <p>(iii) This learning emerges through behaviour that stimulates retrospective thinking.</p>	<p>(i) 'Social reality is not a steady state'; rather, it is 'a dynamic process' that 'occurs rather than merely exists' (1992: 8).</p> <p>(ii) 'The social process is constructed, created by human agents – individual or collective – through their actions' (1992: 8).</p> <p>(iii) 'Social life is a process of structural emergence via actions, and the tension between actions and structures is the ultimate moving force of the process' (1992: 8).</p> <p>(iv) 'Action occurs in the context of encountered structures' (1992: 8).</p> <p>(v) 'Actions drive processes, but processes cannot be explained merely by reference to individual or collective influence' (1997: 338); thus 'context and action are also inseparably intertwined' (1997: 340).</p>	<p>(i) Strategy is a shared social practice undertaken by people.</p> <p>(ii) Strategy is accomplished through the labour of strategy, namely, strategy praxis within a flow of multi-level activity (micro, meso, and macro levels).</p> <p>(iii) Strategy work is conducted through social, symbolic and material tools called practices.</p> <p>(iv) Strategy practitioners (persons or groups) are living beings who perform the strategy work and whose feelings, goals and multi-level actions and interactions shape both legitimate praxis and practices and strategy.</p> <p>(v) While treated as 'discretely bounded entities' (Golsorkhi et al. 2010, p. 7), individuals 'are deemed to be conscious, deliberate, goal-oriented and intentional in their actions' (Chia and MacKay 2007).</p>

(Continued)

Table A3. Continued

School	Andrews (1971) and the design school ^a	Ansoff (1965) and the planning school ^a	Strategy ^b as an emergent process	The processual approach ^c	Strategy-as-practice approach ^{d,e}
			(iv) The role of leadership is not to conceive deliberate strategies but to lead the process of strategic learning. (v) Based on the above, strategies first emerge as patterns from the past and only thereafter might evolve into deliberate plans for the future (and, ultimately, as broader perspectives).	(vi) 'Social processes are deeply embedded in the contexts that produce and are produced by them' (1997: 340). (vii) 'Contexts are shaping and shaped' and 'actors are producers and products' (1997: 338). (viii) The 'interchange between agents and context occurs over time and is cumulative' (1997: 339) and events are temporally interconnected. (ix) 'The legacy of the past is always shaping the emerging future' (1997: 339). (x) 'Trajectories of strategy processes are probabilistic and uncertain because of changing context and human action' (1997: 341).	(vi) 'Individual agency is given ontological primacy over activities, processes and practices' (Chia and MacKay 2007). (vii) 'Change is constructed as an epi-phenomenon of social entities' (Chia and MacKay 2007). (viii) The existence 'of "theoretical holism" in terms of explanatory efficacy' (Chia and MacKay 2007).

Source: Based on

^a Mintzberg (1990a, pp. 113–119), Rialp-Criado (2003, pp. 193–195) and Rialp-Criado *et al.* (2010, pp. 110–111).

^b Mintzberg (1990a, pp. 154–155), Rialp-Criado (2003, p. 206) and Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, pp. 226–294). [Although this perspective is treated as a single perspective here, two different branches could be identified: logical incrementalism (Quinn 1989) and the learning school (Mintzberg *et al.* 1998).]

^c Pettigrew (1992, 1997).

^d Whittington (2007, 2004), Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), Vaara and Whittington (2012), Golsorkhi *et al.* (2010) and Chia and MacKay (2007).

^e These assumptions are general, and unable to cover properly the onto-epistemological nuances within the SAP research.

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